

How monsters are made: 'No remorse, no pity' in Shelley, Dickens and Priestley's

Mister Creecher

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Abstract

Chris Priestley's 2011 novel, *Mister Creecher*, promises to show 'the making of a monster...' Set in 1818, the novel is a metafictional rewriting of Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818), imagining the monster's journey as he tracks his creator to Scotland. In this version, the monster is aided by London pickpocket, Billy, whose provenance, the early novels of Charles Dickens, suggests further intertexts for this contemporary novel. It is Billy, rather than the eponymous 'Creecher', who is the novel's protagonist: a sentimentalized, suffering Dickensian child, whose narrative is reconfigured through encounters with Shelley's gothic novel and a range of other intertexts. Through Billy, *Mister Creecher* (2011) re-imagines Dickens' children and the Dickensian *bildungsroman*, reconfiguring the positions of villain and innocent. Neo-Victorian texts have been characterized by a doubled relationship to their intertexts, a relationship that is parasitic on the one hand, revisiting the traumas of a past reconstructed as barbaric, and redemptive on the other hand, since these reconstructions are usually aimed at a revisionist critique. In the case of *Mister Creecher* (2011) the parasitic relationship of contemporary metafiction to past gothic and Victorian works is a part of the novel's active intertextual fabric. This is a novel that explores how intertextuality itself functions as a corrupting parasite, problematizing and infecting any future encounter with back-grounded works. The introduction of Shelley's creation into Dickens' landscape is a wilfully contradictory gesture. On one hand, the doubling of Billy with Shelley's

monster provides a reverse *bildungsroman*, an account of villainy as social rather than simply essential or sensational, with reference to notions of family and childhood relevant in the contemporary moment. On the other hand, the monster's invasion of Dickensian London is an aggressive act of gothic contagion or colonization, one akin to that imagined by Frankenstein himself in his fear that he has loosed 'a race of devils... upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror'.

Keywords

child

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This article identifies Chris Priestley's work as significant in the field of post-millennial gothic fiction for the way in which it foregrounds intertextuality as key to understanding gothic's literary past and imagining its future. Priestley's work has recently been included in the British Library exhibition, 'Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination' (2014), curated by Dale Townshend, displayed alongside examples of 'classic' and canonical gothic fiction, as well amongst critically celebrated examples of contemporary gothic fiction.

Positioned at the intersection of postmodern metafiction, gothic fiction and children's literature, Priestley's novels recontextualize classic gothic texts and highlight newly relevant points of contact between the past and the present. I identify *Mister Creecher* (2011) as a key text in this developing body of work, since it is the first in a series of overt 'rewritings' of classic gothic texts that now includes *The Dead Men Stood Together* (2013), which adapts Coleridge's 'The Rime of the Ancient Mariner' (1798), and *The Last of the Spirits* (2014), which adapts Charles Dickens's 'A Christmas Carol' (1843).

Two distinct periods of gothic fiction emerge in Priestley's rewritings: Gothic Romanticism and the incipient Victorian novel. Through Priestley's fiction, these two literary periods are posited as contemporary gothic's point of origin, a point in time to which the contemporary writer is inexorably drawn. From the post-millennial vantage point, the period between 1790 and 1900 furnished some of the founding texts of the 'gothic imagination'. This vantage point, however, often tends to ignore notions of literary 'periods' argued for by various critics of gothic fiction. *Mister Creecher* (2011), in particular, continues a trend evident in post-millennial children's gothic to flatten the long nineteenth century as a point of gothic origin, creating a kind of 'quasi-past, a nebulous Victorian/Edwardian/eighteenth-century/Gothic age' (Buckley 2013: 260). This article also identifies Priestley's work as engaging in Neo-Victorian appropriation. Neo-Victorian fiction is, of course, related to contemporary gothic, but also distinct in some important ways. The flattening and mingling of literary 'periods' in these works is not read as naïve 'pastiche', or as the result of a failure to differentiate between delineated historical moments, but as a deliberate choice that opens up a dialogue between different kinds of gothic fiction. Romanticism, for example, is

not simply subsumed into a Neo-Victorian setting. Instead, it remains distinct in Priestley's novels, its narratives brought out in direct contrast to others jostling for interpretive attention. Jay Clayton has argued that Romanticism remains an important reference point for postmodern writers, though this connection is usually often erased: 'Romanticism looms as a dark presence within postmodernism, something like its cultural unconscious' (2003: 8). This connection resurfaces visibly in Priestley's *Mister Creecher* (2011) and in *The Dead Men Stood Together* (2013) particularly. In the case of the former novel, Romanticism's narratives of anti-reason and anti-universalism are pitted against a Victorian realist impulse to essentialize and categorize.

Of course, gothic has always cannibalized itself, feeding on remnants of its own tradition to create new texts (Spooner 2006: 10). Priestley's brand of gothic metafiction foregrounds this process and, in so doing, illuminates the contradictory relationship gothic has with its founding texts. I identify this contradiction as emerging from the fact that rewriting constitutes an 'exorbitant' activity, both confirming and simultaneously writing over past works (Derrida 1976: 157). In addition, I follow Widdowson, and designate Priestley's work as 'active intertextuality', which recasts the 'pretext as itself a "new" text to be read newly' (2006: 506). However, I also read this form of 'active intertextuality' as paradoxically parasitic, appropriating material aggressively for its own purposes, whilst at the same further canonizing the existent narrative. In the case of *Mister Creecher* (2011), which rewrites two 'pretexts', Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) and Charles Dickens's *Oliver Twist* (1838), the contradiction inherent in the act of rewriting is further complicated by the way two pretexts are played off against one another as fundamentally incompatible

yet inexorably connected. In *Mister Creecher* (2011), Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818) is recast as narrative of moral degeneration caused by the irrevocable breakdown of the family, whilst *Oliver Twist* (1838) is positioned as its opposite, a novel that opens with social breakdown, but that ultimately provides the solace of redemption through the restoration of the family. As I will demonstrate, *Mister Creecher* (2011) brings *Oliver Twist*'s Bill Sikes into the same textual space as Shelley's monster, forging a link between the texts that cannot be unmade. Thus, two narratives seemingly at odds with one another are inescapably entwined.

This article also links the contradictory and parasitic nature of active intertextuality to gothic contagion, arguing that Priestley's gothic metafiction coalesces these various textual impulses and produces a gothic contagion transmitted through the intertextual links opened within the novel. In this analysis I conceive of contagion as a part of a specifically gothic pathology, following Sedgwick's analysis of gothic surfaces in 'The character in the veil' (1981). Gothic surfaces are described by Sedgwick as contagious, spreading their characteristics to other surfaces and characters within the text (1981: 258). Crucially, gothic surfaces are 'contagious metonymically, by touch' (Sedgwick 1981: 256), a pathology that can be seen working in *Mister Creecher* (2011) between its pretexts, as well as within them. The active intertextuality of *Mister Creecher* (2011) opens up channels along which the contagion can travel, so that gothic disintegration passes from one text to the other, specifically moving from Shelley's novel into Dickens's. Gothic contagion passes from surface to surface, infecting texts retroactively so as to corrupt any subsequent reading of Dickens's novel, in particular. Thus, even as the act of rewriting appropriates and canonizes

Oliver Twist, recasting it as one of contemporary gothic's foundational texts, it corrupts any future reading by challenging its status as a 'monumental' text. That is, through active intertextuality and gothic contagion, the reified status of past novels, as discrete, self-enclosed and closed entities, is challenged.

The character of Bill Sikes provides the main the point of contact between Dickens's early novel and Shelley's gothic tale. For Charles Dickens, Bill Sikes is one of those 'insensible and callous natures... utterly and incurably bad' (2013: 700). Indeed, from his first appearance in *Oliver Twist*, Sikes exhibits no redeeming features: a 'stoutly built fellow' with 'large swelling calves', in 'soiled' breeches and a 'dirty' 'frayed' handkerchief, beer smeared across his beard, Sikes growls insults at Fagin and kicks his own dog across the room (Dickens 2000: 78). Sikes is a villain of the pre-realist mould, a figure who harks back to an allegorical tradition before the advent of Romanticism and the rise of psychology. Sikes is simply bad and, for Angus Wilson, representative of Dickens's conservative attitude towards criminals: Sikes and the gang 'are brought sternly and horribly to justice' (1966: 7). Nonetheless, Bill Sikes is still an 'engaging ruffian' and holds for Dickens an undeniable attraction (2000: 78). Dickens clearly relished inhabiting the role of Sikes during his last reading tours, in which the murder of Nancy was a regular feature. He is said to have declared, as he took to the stage, 'I shall tear myself to pieces', and afterwards described with some enjoyment the sensation of walking the streets as though he himself were a wanted man (Collins 1994: 267, 270–71). Even for Dickens, whose attitude towards the criminal was conservative, Bill Sikes could be reviled and relished in equal measure.

Sikes has continued to elicit both delight and disgust, even in contemporary adaptations of Dickens's work. Recent interpretations and adaptations of *Oliver Twist* continue to present Sikes as one of the novel's most horribly compelling characters. As Arthur Collins argues, whilst characters like Nancy and Oliver have been dismissed by critics as unrealistic or insipid, Sikes 'still excites our interest, and raises critical and moral problems' (1994: 261). A recent BBC adaptation of the novel (*Oliver Twist* [2007]) is a good example of this continued fascination with Sikes. In this adaptation Sikes is given little in the way of psychology and is portrayed by actor Tom Hardy as a man barely containing his inner chaotic animal violence. The performance recalls both the irredeemable evil villain of nineteenth-century melodrama and the empty-eyed psychopath of twentieth-century gangster films. Fagin simpers, cowering and fading into the background whenever Sikes is on-screen. Popular culture, then, has not sought to recuperate Sikes in the same way as it has its Gothic villains, notably the vampire. Sikes is not an anti-hero, representative of the darker side of ourselves. Nor is he the image of secret excess, hidden desire, or of pleasurable transgression. Sikes remains implacably other.

Yet, *Oliver Twist* is a wish-fulfilment novel; its narrative outcome is, like many of Dickens's novels, consolatory (Newsom 2001: 94). According to one critic, *Oliver Twist* offers 'a humanist vision of what society might be, if we could only see what it really is... a moral metaphor celebrating "strong affection and humanity of heart"' (Gold 1972: 30, 60). The innocent Oliver remains uncorrupted; the wicked, Fagin and Sikes, are punished with death; wrongs are righted; and the idealized bourgeois family is ultimately restored. Dickens's 1841 preface seeks to distance the novel from the so-called 'Newgate novels' of

the time, claiming that his work is not a sensationalized celebration of villainy. Add to this the brutal punishment he metes out to his villains, and it is clear that Dickens works hard to contain the excess, violence and corruption that lie at the heart of *Oliver Twist*. This is a novel deeply at odds with itself, ambivalent about the moral resolution it offers (Grossman 1996: 44–45). Indeed, for all Dickens's attempts to extricate himself from the 'Newgate novel' controversy, it is the novels' villains and their violent acts that have continued to fascinate readers beyond the neat resolution of the plot.

The paradoxes of *Oliver Twist* are what concern *Mister Creecher* (2011), which acts as an interlude for *Frankenstein* and a prologue to *Oliver Twist*. Set in 1818, Priestley's novel fills the gap in Shelley's novel that occurs between Frankenstein leaving for Europe and his confrontation with the monster on the remote Scottish island towards the novel's close. Priestley's narrative tracks the journey the monster makes as he follows his creator across England, checking on the progress of the production of his female companion. However, whilst *Mister Creecher* (2011) is concerned with the protagonist/antagonist relationship central to Shelley's novel, and with the world of that novel, the action of the novel unfolds in a different literary world altogether. Despite the 1818 setting, and references to the figures of late Romanticism, the opening of the novel establishes that we are in a Dickensian London through its introduction of a gang of pickpockets, and the orphan Billy.

Ostensibly, then, *Mister Creecher* (2011) is a prologue to *Oliver Twist*, but a prologue that enters into conflict with its original, undermining its containment of villainy and violence. The pairing of *Oliver Twist* with Shelley's *Frankenstein* draws disturbing parallels between

the two narratives and *Mister Creecher* (2011) makes use of gothic tropes to corrupt and unravel the fabric of the realist novel. It is important to note here that *Mister Creecher* (2011) in no way signals itself as a rewriting or adaptation of Dickens, either in its title, in its visual presentation and marketing, or for most of its narrative. The novel instead advertises itself as a metafictional reworking of *Frankenstein* alone. There is, then, something deliberately underhand in the novel's treatment of Dickens, a tactic that partly exploits the device of a plot 'twist', revealing at the close that the main character, 'Billy', was in fact Bill Sikes all along. However, this underhand method of rewriting also reveals the parasitic and contagious pathology of gothic intertextuality, passing the contagion through into Dickens's novel as though by the means of a silent infection, giving the host text little chance to mount a defence.

Despite the overt references to Shelley's novel, it is Billy, rather than the eponymous 'Creecher', who is the main protagonist. Billy, an orphan turned pickpocket, is reminiscent of a number of exploited and abused children depicted throughout Dickens's *oeuvre*, though Billy's early life is clearly written to echo Oliver's. Like Oliver, Billy is a pickpocket, brutalized by the poor laws and an inhuman system of workhouses and orphanages, left finally to the mercies of a criminal underworld which exploits the weak and threatens to rob them of their humanity and innocence. Similarities between Billy and Oliver are emphasized throughout: both are born in the workhouse, losing their mother in infancy; both are passed into the hands of abusive and exploitative guardians; Oliver narrowly escapes being apprenticed to a sweep and Billy runs away from his sweep; both end up in

the criminal underworld and are enticed into criminal acts by the promise of food and shelter and neither know they have fallen in with pickpockets until it is too late. Oliver risks starvation on the streets of London when he is picked up by Dodger and Jack and brought to Fagin, 'their unexpected offer of shelter [...] too tempting to be resisted' (Dickens 2000: 51). Billy has already embraced life in the pickpocket gang when he meets Creecher in the opening pages of Priestley's novel, but he too is tempted into further acts of villainy at the moment when he is weakest. Billy lies unconscious in the gutter, near death, when Creecher intervenes and removes him to the safety and warmth of a baker's attic. In each case, the moment of salvation for the boy signals his entry into deeper levels of violence and corruption, into a world that threatens to destroy him completely.

Mister Creecher (2011) is a patchwork creation, incorporating references to a number of texts from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, producing a dialogue between contemporary gothic and its multi-layered literary and popular past. This pairing of Billy and Creecher, who agree to travel together to mutual benefit, begins as a 'buddy' story. The novel also incorporates the *bildungsroman*, and echoes of Magwitch and Pip from Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1860) can also be seen in the relationship between Billy and Creecher. Billy and Creecher's journey takes them from the grimy streets of Dickens's London to the outskirts of Elizabeth Gaskell's Manchester and, finally, to the fells of William Wordsworth's Lake District. Along the way abound references to an array of literary and popular fictions: *Huckleberry Finn*, *Great Expectations*, *Terminator 2*, the Hollywood monster movies of the 1930s, as well as other 'Newgate novels', notably William Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839–1840). Sprinkled atop all of this are lines from the

Romantic poetry of Keats and Shelley. The patchwork nature of *Mister Creecher* (2011) is the first strategy whereby the text undermines and unravels the narrative resolution offered by Dickens's novel, and its tendency to aim for binaristic moral structures, for it not only introduces Shelley's monster into the pages of *Oliver Twist*, but a host of other references. Increasingly, the different narrative threads jostling for attention work to undermine the *bildungsroman* initially promised and it becomes increasingly clear, despite *Mister Creecher's* (2011) 'buddy story' premise, that the relationship developing between Billy and Creecher is not one that will ultimately lead to redemption, successful maturation, or to the restoration of humanist values. The contact made by a host of other texts with the core gothic pretext, *Frankenstein*, exposes them all to its central contagion: a movement towards disintegration.

The book signals to its reader from the outset that there is only one outcome to Creecher's story. The novel's tagline – 'the making of a monster' – refers, in part, to the production of this mate, undertaken by Frankenstein in the background to Priestley's novel. It refers specifically to the physical processes involved in monster making: the collection of body parts; Frankenstein's continued research into decay and revivification, and, of course, to the inevitable and violent unmaking of this second monster. Throughout *Mister Creecher* (2011), the monster heads inexorably northwards to his confrontation with Frankenstein and to that crucial scene on the remote Scottish island: the moment of destruction that will irrevocably rob the monster of his last remaining link to humanity.

More importantly, however, Priestley's novel is about the making of Billy, a character denied the narrative trajectory of Dickens's more fortunate orphans, specifically Pip and Oliver. There is no intervention of the fates, no lost inheritance restored, and no one to rescue Billy from the villains and monsters he has fallen in with. In this way, *Mister Creecher* (2011) invites us to read Billy as a foil to these Dickensian orphans, revealing the stories of Pip and Oliver as consolatory and hopelessly idealistic. Moreover, the novel rejects the initial promise of the 'buddy' set-up. Billy is not saved by his contact with Creecher, nor can he save Creecher in return. Indeed, in the closing pages of the novel, Billy becomes just as monstrous as the man he has been travelling with and it is revealed that the orphan whose fate we have so invested in throughout, the child for whom we have been hoping for a happy ending, is in fact Dickens's most infamous villain and murderer, giving his name to the groom at a coaching Inn as 'Billy – No, Bill... Bill Sikes' (Priestley 2011: 382). *Mister Creecher* (2011), then, tells the story of the making of a very different kind of monster to that of Shelley's novel. When Billy transforms into Bill in the closing pages, he becomes the simply evil villain of sensation and melodrama. In this doubled and contradictory act of rewriting, Bill Sikes is given more depth and psychology afforded him in the original novel, before then having all of this character development stripped away, erased, as the oddly reversed *bildungsroman* structure of the rewriting delivers him to his fated textual destination.

On the surface it would appear that *Mister Creecher* (2011) asks its readers to reconsider the image of Bill Sikes presented by Dickens. By pairing Billy with Creecher and suggesting parallels between their journeys, the novel refigures Sikes as an individual with a history,

with a psychology and suggests he could be reread as a Romantic anti-hero. In this sense, *Mister Creecher* (2011) may be read as being in fundamental disagreement with Dickens about what makes a villain and what makes a monster. As Juliet John explains, Dickens deliberately eschews psychology in his portrayal of villains, loath to shift the emphasis away from action to motivation (2001: 10). Thus *Oliver Twist* returns to a pre-realist mode of characterization, to melodrama and moral absolutes; for Dickens this is a way of subverting a particular objectionable model of Romantic subjectivity, one that privileges an internalized and individualistic emotional response (John 2001: 14). However, *Mister Creecher's* (2011) relationship with *Oliver Twist* is not one of straightforward disagreement. For one thing, *Mister Creecher* (2011) is at pains to conceal its relationship with Dickens's novel until its closing pages, and, if any parallels between Billy and a character from Dickens's work are emphasized, it is Oliver rather than Bill Sikes who is evoked. Indeed, *Mister Creecher* (2011) appropriates the *bildungsroman* structure of Dickens's novels, at least in part, and, in doing so, collapses the characters of Bill Sikes and Oliver Twist, appropriating Oliver's narrative in order to elaborate upon the one denied Bill. In doing so, *Mister Creecher* (2011) restages many of the explanatory principles of Dickens's novel: social and economic degradation, family breakdown, slum conditions in an increasingly urban London and the reprehensible exploitation of vulnerable members of society by predatory capitalists.

And yet, whilst *Mister Creecher* (2011) is to some degree interested in society and psychology, in the nurture rather than nature, the narrative it gives of Sikes's history does not serve to make the villain any less monstrous, any less other. Kucich argues that to

ascribe psychology to Dickens's villains would result in the loss of the 'malevolent hold they exercise over the reader', but this is simply not the case in *Mister Creecher* (2011) (1981: 63). Here, psychology becomes something of a side show as the action accelerates towards its brutal conclusion, and there is a collapse of *Frankenstein* into *Oliver Twist* and vice versa. Neither of the models of villainy and monstrosity offered by the pretexts – Romantic, internalized psychology on the one hand and melodramatic, externalized evil on the other – triumph in *Mister Creecher* (2011). Sikes is no longer simply a caricature of villainy, a function of the melodrama, for he now has a history, a childhood. Yet nurture alone does not explain the monstrous transformation that takes place, and fails to adequately create empathy or understanding for his actions. In fact, the collapse of Dickens and Shelley works even to undermine Priestley's avowed intentions in writing the novel. For Priestley, the novel explores what happens to a child when you deny it love, home and a nurturing family life (Priestley quoted in Buckley 2012). For the author, this is a novel with a socially interrogative agenda, one that very much takes up where Shelley left off in a sympathetic exploration of how monsters are made. Yet, when Bill Sikes emerges at the close of *Mister Creecher* (2011) he remains as monstrous as he ever was. Revealing how the monster is made hardly makes it any less monstrous.

On the one hand, it is tempting to read Priestley's novel as engaged in contemporary social concerns, namely anxieties surrounding childhood and family. However, its overt concern with intertextuality and with the genealogy of gothic fiction suggests that this reading can only be taken so far. Neo-Victorian texts are often read as providing a double critique of both past and present (Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 10; Morey and Nelson 2012: 1) and, in

some ways, *Mister Creecher* (2011) follows this trend, following Neo-Victorian fictions in its reconstruction of the family as 'failed, abusive or disintegrating' (Wohl 1978: 9; Kohlke and Gutleben 2011: 2). A reading that looks outward to *extramural* discourses – such as contemporary anxieties about childhood or family – is certainly available in Priestley's work, then, and comparisons between Billy and recent discussions about how to conceive of 'children' who commit violent or criminal acts are perhaps unavoidable, but this is primarily a novel about the gothic novel, the gothic as a literary history, and gothic conventions. Although this novel's use of the *bildungsroman* structure goes some way to exploring the social conditions that lead to individuals rejecting society and committing violent acts, it overtly avoids making analogous comparisons to the world outside the text. Billy is revealed at the close of the narrative to be a named fictional character from a distinct fictional world, and his fate is tied to the history, conventions and tropes of that fictional world. Thus, the novel's early exploration of the injustices that helped form Sikes's violent character fails to redeem him and fails to rescue him from his eventual fate. In any case, the closing pages of *Mister Creecher* (2011) reorient the reader away from the extratextual – or 'real' world – and towards another fictional narrative. In this way it resists being put in the service of a critical narrative that would ask it to revisit the past in order to revitalize the present. In this way, *Mister Creecher* (2011) is unlike the Neo-Victorian novels centred upon the family identified by Morey and Nelson, which are posited as parasitic for the purposes of redemption (2012: 3). Instead, *Mister Creecher* (2011) follows the trajectory of the gothic novel, inwards towards death and disintegration.

In *Mister Creecher* (2011) monster making is physical, not psychological; it is the result of the contagious pathology of gothic's surfaces. In *Mister Creecher* (2011), as in Dickens's novels, psychology is largely externalized, plot-driven and theatrical. The experiences Billy undergoes throughout the novel that serve to turn him into a monster are largely physical experiences, linked to the physical acts undertaken by Frankenstein as he collects the materials he needs to make the monster's mate. Billy sees Frankenstein dissect corpses and he witnesses Creecher brutally beat a pair of resurrectionists working for the scientist. The most grotesque of Frankenstein's actions occurs as Billy's journey draws to a close. Crucially, this final act takes place not in Scotland, but in the Lake District. Here, Billy feels that he may finally be free of the degradation and misery of London. He even meets a beautiful girl and imagines himself living a simple life, working the land. This dream, however, is a gossamer delusion: it is destroyed brutally and swiftly. The girl, Jane, dies from a weak heart. Bereft, Billy attends her graveside in mourning and finds the ground disturbed. Pulling back the coffin lid he sees 'her chest ripped open and where her heart would have been there was now a gaping hole, lolling open like a fool's mouth' (Priestley 2011: 373). Jane's heart is the final component Frankenstein needs to complete the process of making the second monster. It is this last act of physical monster production that is the catalyst for the monstrous change in Billy. As he walks out of the landscape that has become poison to him, he undergoes a final physical change: 'He was bigger now... he stretched out his neck and thrust out his jaw, setting his face against the world... His arms, heavier now and tipped with meaty fists, swung in rhythm with a walk that had become, by degrees, a swagger' (Priestley 2011: 379). Billy picks up a piece of wood to use as a club and, as two men pass by, Billy blocks their way. They attempt to pacify the brute, but Billy

swings the club and smashes one of the men to the ground. In a moment of violence that exceeds anything that has come before in the novel, or that will be described in *Oliver Twist*, Billy hits the prone man again and again until his club is 'filthy with gore' (Priestley 2011: 381). Billy is gone; Bill Sikes has taken his place. It is the physical desecration carried out by Frankenstein on Jane's body that has precipitated the transformation.

Mister Creecher's (2011) scenes of violence are moments of intertextual contagion, in which characters substitute for one another in a series of doublings and repetitions. The scene that meets Billy in the graveyard substitutes for the scene towards which Creecher is heading, and the brutalized body of Jane substitutes for the monster's mate. The two women share a heart and both are corpses destroyed at the hands of Frankenstein. In fact, not even Frankenstein, who barely appears in *Mister Creecher* (2011), escapes the contagion, since the repercussions of his actions are now doubled, reverberating beyond the pages of his own novel into two others. Jane's body is important as it indicates the extent of the contagion at work: this is not simply a case of parallels and doubling, since Jane's desecrated corpse substitutes for both Elizabeth Frankenstein and Nancy, two women who will be brutally murdered subsequent in narrative terms to the events played out in this novel. *Mister Creecher* (2011) becomes not simply a point of a dialogic interchange between Dickens and Shelley, but a point of cross-contamination, with the violence and corruption of the one bleeding into the other and vice versa.

An opening, a crossing point between texts, *Mister Creecher* (2011) is infested with repetition. Creecher and Billy are obviously doubles for one another, of course. Both are

rejected children, lacking a caring family or a home and both are villains who perpetrate horrendous acts of violence. Billy is also doubled by other villains in *Mister Creecher* (2011), notably Skinner, the psychopathic brute who terrorizes Billy in the London streets before Creecher intervenes. Skinner doubles again for Dickens's Bill Sikes, his name echoing the surname Billy has yet to reveal. Billy is Oliver's double too, of course, and, doubled by another William, the child of Frankenstein, whose life is taken by Creecher. Fathers are also doubled multiple times over. Frankenstein, an absent father to Creecher, stands in for Billy's own absent and uncaring father. Creecher also stands in as Billy's father too and, ultimately abandons the boy in pursuit of his own desires, just as he has been abandoned by Frankenstein. Whilst Frankenstein and Creecher might be deemed 'bad' fathers, their roles are doubled by two 'good' fathers in the text. There is the Cumbrian farmer, Thwaites, who takes Billy under his wing, and Gratz, the fence who has saved Billy from starvation by giving him employment, albeit exploitative, in the London pickpocket gang. Both 'good' fathers, however, are also ultimately rejected. The consolation they appear to offer is, after all, premised on a lie. Thwaites only takes Billy in because he is mourning for his son and believes the boy is an angel come to save him; Gratz merely wants to turn a profit, and is quick to reject Billy when he glimpses the monster. Gratz has a further double in Fagin, of course, who also appears in *Mister Creecher* (2011), though, like Billy, his identity is not revealed until the final pages. Fagin is Gratz' nephew and it is him to whom Billy inevitably returns.

The entire novel is structured around an act of doubling, that is, on Frankenstein's (re)production of a second monster. This act is what propels the forward motion of the

narrative, forcing Billy and Creecher from one violent situation to another. Frankenstein's monster making is an act of doubling with catastrophic repercussions. The production and subsequent abandonment of the first creature passes on like an infection to Billy, who reproduces the monstrous acts carried out by Creecher. In effect, Creecher reproduces the actions of his creator, (re)producing Billy in his own image, as a monster. This contagion of monster (re)production is very like that which Frankenstein fears when he first agrees to make the monster a mate. He imagines 'a race of devils... propagated upon the earth, who might make the very existence of the species of man a condition precarious and full of terror' (Shelley 2008: 138). *Mister Creecher* (2011) rewrites Bill Sikes as that monstrous progeny.

Doubling in *Mister Creecher* (2011) is specifically gothic since it constitutes a contagion of violence and monstrosity. Each doubled character passes the infection to a new group of characters in a new textual setting: Creecher becomes his creator; Billy becomes Creecher; Billy takes Skinner's place; Jane merges into Nancy and into Elizabeth; Gratz is replaced by his nephew, Fagin, and thus the whole exploitative system of the pickpocket gang is reproduced, ready for Dodger, Charley Bates and Oliver to take Billy's place. Violence and corruption are thus not contained within the dingy streets of a certain borough of London, or within the confines of Priestley's novel, nor within the frame of Shelley's: they spread, first outward across a nineteenth-century English landscape, before exceeding these spatial borders, soon passing across literary periods, narrative time, settings and textual worlds so that the separate influences which constitute the novel begin to blur and disintegrate.

This is very unlike the doubling of Dickens's novels, which usually acts to produce stable pairs and fixed positions. Juliet John argues that Dickens's villains in particular are often doubled by alter egos as in the case of Fagin and Sikes (2001: 9). For John, this doubling creates a dialectic of opposites: each member of the pair occupies opposing ends of an emotional scale, a split between excessive passion on the one hand, excessive repression on the other (2001: 9). In Dickens doubling is a form of patterning that works to structure the novel through oppositions. Nicola Bradbury notes that in *Oliver Twist* groups of characters work in opposition, with 'melodrama for Fagin, Sikes and Nancy, all obliterated in blood... and a neat resolution for Oliver, Mr Brownlow and Rose Maylie in comic romance' (2001: 155). Joseph Gold likewise notes the doubling of Sikes and Nancy with Rose and Harry: the latter are rewarded with family and marriage in contrast to the death and sacrifice suffered by their oppositional counterparts (1972: 61). In *Mister Creecher* (2011), however, doubling does not effect separation or create distinctions. As the novel develops, the characters of Billy and Creecher merge as do the different textual worlds of which they are part. Creecher kills William Frankenstein before the novel opens, then Skinner in the opening pages, later, two resurrectionists he finds disturbing a grave and later, of course, he will kill Elizabeth. Billy follows this trajectory of increasing violence, and his final destination will be the murder of Nancy. It is significant that Billy's name echoes both the innocent whom has already been murdered – William Frankenstein – and the villain who is yet to be named – Bill Sikes. *Mister Creecher* (2011) follows on from the death of William Frankenstein with the metaphorical death of Billy, moving the Dickensian child from the position of innocent to the position of monster.

As well as creating contagious repetition and infectious doubles, *Mister Creecher* (2011) blurs distinctions and unfixes positions, resulting in the 'sickening descent into disintegration' that is, for Chris Baldick, characteristic of the gothic novel (1992: xix). This disintegration is signalled by the way the textual landscape physically evaporates at the close of the novel. Billy leaves the bludgeoned corpse behind in the Cumbrian lane, and catches a coach back to London. As Billy and Creecher part ways in this final scene, the difference between them is erased:

He did not need Creecher anymore. Billy opened his eyes and looked out of the carriage window. A heavy mist lay like a filthy fleece in the bottom of the valley. He closed his eyes once more as the coach rattled down the steep road to be swallowed in its awful blankness. (Priestley 2011: 384)

These lines, and the disappearance of the monster into a void, echo the final lines of Shelley's novel, which see the monster 'borne away by the waves and lost in darkness and distance' (2008: 191).

The only dialectic doubling in *Mister Creecher* (2011) is one that occurs outside the narrative, in the pairing of Billy with Oliver Twist. Billy is Oliver's opposite: a child inescapably corrupted by experience rather than one who – in Virginia Blum's words – survives 'the test of environmental corruption and is rewarded' (1995: 144). This difference is signalled early in the novel in Billy's repeated assertions of admiration for the heroes of the *Newgate Calendar* (1776-1826). Conversely, Oliver's response to the *Newgate*

Calendar is one of horror. The 'dreadful crimes' make his 'blood run cold' and he falls upon his knees to pray to heaven to spare him from such deeds (Dickens 2000: 130). If *Oliver Twist* is at pains to distinguish itself from the 'Newgate novels' of the time, Harrison Ainsworth's *Jack Sheppard* (1839–1840) in particular, *Mister Creecher* (2011) makes its child protagonist a Newgate devotee. Billy not only loves glamorous tales of the highwayman, he gets to *be* Jack Sheppard when he uses Creecher to stage a series of highway robberies, returning to London at the close of the novel with a decidedly Newgate swagger. And yet, this pairing of Billy and Oliver is only dialectical so far, since the characters are as similar as they are oppositional. Again, then, it is in the effacing of distinctions that *Mister Creecher* (2011) most undermines Dickens's tale. Billy *is* Oliver, but he is also Sikes. This collapse of characters undermines the guarantee of goodness that Oliver represents in the pretext. The consolatory image of the innocent child, the figure which is held as the cure for corruption and monstrosity at the heart of *Oliver Twist*, is revealed to be hopelessly false. The binary of innocent child and the corrupted child suggests a separation that is in fact false, since innocence and corruption are two sides of same coin. As James Kincaid points out, 'by insisting so loudly on the innocence, purity and asexuality of the child, we have created a subversive echo: experience, corruption, eroticism' (1994: 4–5). Innocence cannot exist without its opposing term: innocence is not innocence of knowledge about sexuality or death, for this is precisely what children are demonstrated to be already implicated in (Lesnik-Oberstein 2000: 237). The Collapse of Bill Sikes/Billy and Oliver reveals the inherently contradictory nature of the innocence invoked in Dickens's novel, an notion of innocence inherited from the Romantics, and one that continues to inform discourses about childhood today.¹

Determined to destroy the image of the 'innocent' child, *Mister Creecher* (2011) concludes its action in the landscape of Wordsworth's 'Prelude', home to the Romantic innocent of which Dickens's Oliver is an echo. This beautiful landscape at first promises to invigorate Billy as it does the child of the Prelude. But for Billy there will be no 'unconscious intercourse with eternal beauty' because it is here that Billy experiences the defining trauma of Jane's brutalized body (Wordsworth [1888] 1999). It is also the space in which he discovers Creecher's last secret: the monster is a child murderer. In its reference to this act, occurring prior to its own narrative, *Mister Creecher* (2011) reveals that 'innocence' has always already been destroyed. As he leaves the Romantic landscape, Billy is struck by how ridiculous a skylark looks and hurls a stone at it in bitter scorn. He looks upon the landscape now with 'clarity', as though waking from a dream (Priestley 2011: 377). The reference to Shelley's poem – 'To a Skylark' – is significant. For Shelley the skylark is 'unbodied joy'; for Billy a symbol of a land 'stark and without hope' (1919; Priestley 2011: 378). Percy Shelley himself also appears briefly in the novel, falling into a fit when he glimpses sight of the monster on a London street. Neither Shelley's melancholy idealism, then, nor Wordsworth's innocent child survives the contagion brought to England by Creecher. This rejection of Romanticism in the closing pages of the novel illustrates the complicated engagement that *Mister Creecher* (2011) has with its other pretext: Romanticism. Though aspects of Romanticism compliment postmodern metafiction (Clayton 2003: 7) and are used in *Mister Creecher* (2011) to counter the underlying Victorian narrative, a contemporary scepticism towards fixed notions of childhood, family and innocence mean that Romanticism is likewise rejected.

Billy's last act as he leaves the landscape of 'The Prelude' is one of such brutal violence that it is nothing less than an assault on the sanctity of the Romantic child. The aggression with which Billy beats the man in the lane – with no provocation whatsoever – seems directed at the passivity and silence of Dickens's innocents, particularly Oliver and Dick. It is important to note that Oliver and Dick are echoes of a Romantic ideal that for Dickens is already fading. That is, the Dickensian child is already degraded and diminished from that offered by the Romantics. In Dickens's novel young Dick is left to die and Oliver's happy ending with Brownlow described at the end of the novel is narrated only in the conditional tense, suggesting that the happy ending is a future never quite met (Blum 1995: 162).

Nonetheless, though Dickens mourns to some extent the disappearance of the Romantic-child-as-innocent it still offers this child as a consolatory image, guaranteed by the enduring innocence and goodness of Oliver himself, who is a restorative to the foster father, Brownlow. Rather than offering tentative ambivalence, Dickens's conditional ending creates the sense of continuation and hopefulness: Oliver's story is not yet finished, and much might yet be hoped for. This openness is corrupted by the end of *Mister Creecher* (2011). The final scene of the later novel quite literally beats the fantasy into the ground and raises a monstrous creation in its place. The beating scene deliberately evokes the heightened language of horror Dickens uses to describe Nancy's murder: 'Of all bad deeds that, under cover of the darkness, had been committed within wide London's bounds since night hung over it, that was the worst' (2000: 317). In a reversal of the usual bildungsroman, *Mister Creecher* (2011) shows that Billy's story is over before it even begins.

Billy and Creecher hate the world together, and set out towards death. Billy is fixated on the highwayman's last journey to Tyburn: 'that was the way to go thousands of people standing at your feet as you gave your last dying speech... To die a famous death – what Billy would not give for that!' (Priestley 2011: 169) In this sense he also echoes the less fortunate children found in *Oliver Twist*. As a criminal child, Billy echoes Charley Bates and the Artful Dodger, though the representation of Billy bitterly rejects the comedic relief offered by Dickens. Through Bates and the Dodger, death by hanging becomes comic when Bates is upset that Dodger has been caught stealing something so unglamorous as a snuff box and thus will not have his name immortalized in the *Calendar* (Dickens 2000: 287). Bates and Dodger are seduced by the glamour of crime, of course, just as Billy is and all three are examples of the kind of children imagined by the House of Commons Enquiry into Juvenile Criminals. Bates and the Dodger are also the only characters in *Oliver Twist* who appear comedic or attractive, recalling to some degree the protagonists of the contemporary Newgate novels *Oliver Twist* otherwise rejects (John 2001: 130). They are also the only two characters who effectively escape the taint of the underworld: Dodger is transported; Bates moves to the country. Ultimately, they are offered a form of rehabilitation or escape. However, as we have seen, Billy's own rural escape does not turn out quite so well. Indeed, for Billy, the fame and glamour offered by crime is always only ever about death itself, and death is always the only way out. It is no empty threat. Early on in the novel he witnesses a hanging that is anything but comic:

The hangman covered her face with a nightcap, stepped back and dropped the trapdoors. Suddenly all was silent. Billy looked away. He's seen that dance before and had no wish to see it again. He wished his ears had not caught the creak of the hemp ropes as they took their weight. (Priestley 2011: 103)

Billy becomes increasingly obsessed with the noose, an obsession that is not only an uncomfortable reminder for Creecher of poor Justine's death in *Frankenstein*, but also foreshadows Billy's own fate in *Oliver Twist*. Indeed, *Mister Creecher* (2011) is a novel haunted by endings from the very beginning. How could it not be? For Sikes and the monster, the ending is already written and that ending is synonymous with death.

In contrast, *Oliver Twist* pursues an ending that is really a beginning, what Virginia Blum calls a 'correction of origins in the happy family' (1995: 128). Whilst Dickens's novel might understand that the Romantic ideal Oliver offers is fragile at best, Oliver nonetheless continues to act as a guarantee for the stability of the bourgeois family. His fate promises us that the wrongs of the past can be effaced, that the defective family of the novel's opening can be replaced with a happy one (Blum 1995: 158–59). As Blum explains, 'Oliver's emergence unscathed from his sojourn through London's criminal underside is the allegorical correction of his parent's situation [...] Oliver succeeds where they succumbed' (1995: 141). In this way, *Oliver Twist* takes us backwards, not forwards – to a new, better beginning. *Mister Creecher* (2011), on the other hand, lurches inexorably forwards to its inescapable ending. Moreover, repetition simply works here to perpetuate the mistakes and failures of the past, not correct them. Indeed, in *Mister Creecher* (2011) the child simply

moves from one defective family to another, ultimately finding himself in perhaps one of the most defective literary families of all – the Frankenstein family. Billy as Oliver's double is no longer a guarantee of innocence, then, of the restoration of a happy family, or the sign of a future in which the mistakes of the past can be repaired. He has become a carrier of contagion, returning from his experiences in Shelley's world to Dickensian London at the end of the novel, carrying with him cynicism, bitterness, chaos, violence and corruption. Indeed, as he clambers onto the coach heading south, Billy's club is still filthy with the gore of the unprovoked murder he has just committed.

Mister Creecher (2011) is more than a prologue to Dickens's novel. It places itself in a dialogue with the original text and its context: with the controversy of the 'Newgate novels'; with the scandal of the reading tours and Dickens's demise; with mid-Victorian social debates about childhood and criminality, nature and nurture, punishment and rehabilitation that formed the background to Dickens's novel. Moreover *Creecher* brings into this dialogue not only a gothic text, *Frankenstein*, but a series of gothic strategies, forming a rejoinder that works, ultimately, to undermine, fragment and disintegrate the narrative of *Oliver Twist*. Reopening the dialogue with Dickens initiates infection and contagion with the result that any subsequent engagement with Dickens's text becomes contaminated. The author's note at the end of *Mister Creecher* (2011) invites the reader to go on to read *Oliver Twist* to find out what became of 'Billy Sikes'. The invitation is decidedly macabre and the conflation of the two names is also interesting. Bill Sikes is both 'Sikes' and 'Billy' – 'Billy Sikes' – the Dickensian villain *and* the child protagonist of *Mister*

Creecher (2011). The reader is being asked here to take the 'Billy' of Priestley's novel back with them into Dickens's world – to become a carrier of contagion themselves, re-entering the fog of Dickens's text at Billy's side. What that reader will then discover in the pages of *Oliver Twist* will inevitably and irrevocably be changed by what they – and Billy – have experienced.

Ultimately, *Mister Creecher* (2011) violates both *Oliver Twist* and *Frankenstein* as monumental texts, that is as self-evident, self-enclosed and inert artefacts of the gothic canon. Priestley's novel is less a rejoinder in an open dialogue than it is a brutal assault. In fact, what *Mister Creecher* (2011) does with *Oliver Twist* might be likened to what the monster does to little William Frankenstein in the woods by Lake Geneva: The monster throttles William and leaves his broken body behind for Frankenstein to find. When we return to *Oliver Twist*, I think, the marks of violence enacted by *Mister Creecher* (2011) will likewise be there waiting for us. Paradoxically, however, the very act of rewriting also has the effect of further cementing these texts' place in the canon, arguing for their status as important narratives of continuing power. The contradictory, parasitic and contagious aspects of active intertextuality, a mode of writing dominant in contemporary gothic fictions, is revealed throughout *Mister Creecher* (2011), a novel which opens out into the complex and often paradoxical relationship contemporary gothic has with its own past.

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Note

¹ The dualistic image of the innocent child/the evil child has been a common trope in gothic fiction since its inception. Margarita Georgieva's study on the gothic child argues that the figure of the child is crucial to the structure of the gothic novel, which has always been a novel of the family. The child in gothic novels figures as the future of that family, offering variously: the retribution for past sins; an opportunity for renewal; a guarantee of legitimacy and family continuity

(Georgieva, 2013). Steven Bruhm's study of the gothic child in twentieth-century cinema also highlights the dualistic nature of the child in gothic. As a site of innocence, and therefore blankness, the child is vulnerable to attack and invasion. Fantasies of this type play out in horror films such as *The Midwich Cuckoos*, *The Omen* and *The Exorcist*. For Bruhm, the child is a figure of threat in contemporary culture, and horror film stages a killing of this threat. The Gothic child in this analysis constitutes an 'open fault-line on the landscape of our fantasies' (Bruhm 2006: 111). In children's literature, however, the gothic child has a rather different function. Dale Townshend notes a preference for the 'haunted child' in discourses of children's literature during its foundational period (1764–1830), with writers promoting with some glee the use of terrifying tales for children (2008). Elsewhere, I note the continued investment in children's literature in the figure of the gothic child, in the canonization of Neil Gaiman's *Coraline* (2002), a contemporary gothic novel written for children (Buckley 2015).